

2014 BACK IN THE SADDLE!

Spanish Mustangs designated "The Heritage Horse of Oklahoma"

By: Francine Locke Bray

On March 5, 2014, the Oklahoma Legislature unanimously voted to designate as The Heritage Horse of Oklahoma the foundation herds owned by Bryant and Darlene Rickman and registered with the Southwest Spanish Mustang Association (SSMA). Part of Resolution No. 34 states, "with its rich heritage, resilience, and perseverance, the Oklahoma Colonial Spanish horse embodies the very spirit of Oklahoma and remains a living piece of state history."

On April 26, 2014, the city of Hugo held a re-enactment of the movie "True Grit," complete with a "Parade of Champions" honoring past and present rodeo champions of Southeastern Oklahoma. Approximately two dozen riders, each one on his/her Oklahoma Colonial Spanish Mustang participated in this the first, official, "outing" of The Heritage Horse of Oklahoma.

Some of the horses that Mr. Rickman owns originally came from Mississippi with Choctaw families who brought them along the Trail of Tears to their new home in Indian Territory. Until recently, these horses roamed freely in the Kiamichi Mountain ranges, in the Choctaw Nation territory, of which Blackjack Mountain is a part. Mr. Rickman's horses include both the purebred Spanish Mustang line owned by Choctaw families who lived in the region, along with the strain bred by Gilbert Jones who dedicated his life to the preservation of the Native American horse and formed the SSMA.

This last April I traveled with my husband to Poplarville, MS to meet Mr. Bill Brown. Mr. Brown is Mississippi Choctaw, a descendant of Chief Pushmataha. He lives on his ancestral lands, owned by his family since 1811. Also living on these lands for as long as Mr. Brown and his family can remember is a small herd of horses the family refers to as Pine Tackys. According to Mr. Brown, the family has always had these horses on their land. About two years ago Dr. Phil Sponenberg of the Livestock Conservancy was visiting the Browns because they also raise Pineywoods cattle, another heritage animal. While he was there, several of Mr. Browns' horses emerged from the woods. Dr. Sponenberg immediately recognized them as very similar in conformation to the Rickmans' horses. These Mississippi horses are descended from horses that did not make the Trail of Tears journey to Indian Territory. Yet DNA testing showed that they are genetically the same as the Oklahoma Colonial Spanish Mustangs (which include the Choctaw horses). While in Mississippi I was told of another herd of horses whose DNA also matches the Oklahoma Colonial Spanish Mustangs. We are continuing to research the heritage of the Choctaw horse. This year we hope to speak with families who have records of their horses in both Mississippi and Oklahoma and to gather oral histories of these horses from them. If you would like to share with us your family story, please give me a call at #317-409-6517 or email me at flbray@iupui.edu.

As part of the continuing effort to educate not only our people but also the general public about the importance of the Oklahoma Colonial Spanish Mustang, Jennie and Brad Smith took two of their Choctaw horses, Chief Blue Streak and SScopycat, to the Oklahoma State Fair. The horses, of course,

were well received and charmed their way into the hearts of many Fair visitors. Jennie and Brad distributed educational materials and spent time speaking with visitors about the horses' history, conformation, and skills. They have been invited to return to the State Fair this Fall so if you are in Oklahoma City for the Fair, be sure to stop by and meet the horses.

Jennie and Brad also were asked to return to Wellston Elementary School in April. This year they took Chisto, a Colonial Spanish Mustang. Chisto is trained in dressage and spent the day "showing off" his talents to over 300 students. Some of you may remember Chisto when he came to the Choctaw Labor Day Festival three years ago with his owner, Rebecca Stair of Arkansas.

Once again, the horses have been excelling in various competitions. Cathy Cook of Michigan wrote us that 2013 was an "amazing year" for Red Cloud, her Choctaw Spanish Mustang stallion. Their Great Lakes Distance Riding Association (GLDRA) awards include the Legend Cup (high mileage award), Grand Champion Competitive Extended Distance, Grand Champion competitive Lightweight, Extended Distance, and a 3,000 Mile Award. Red Cloud also received similar awards in the Upper Midwest Endurance and Competitive Ride Association (UMECRA), including the Charles Phillips Memorial Versatility Award. To receive this award Red Cloud completed at least two events in each division, Endurance – 50 miles or more - and Limited Distance and Competitive.

Cathy's niece, Emma Ruggenbuck, and her horse, No Way's Northern Star, were named UMECRA and GLDRA Grand Champion Competitive Junior Divisions. No Way's Northern Star also received the Merry Legs Award, given by vote of the junior riders to the horse who best cared for its junior rider during the ride season.

Gatlin Dale of Soper, OK, on his Choctaw horse named Spotted Wolf, has excelled in the junior rodeo circuit. In the Fall of 2013, with his roping partner, Dalton Dill, he competed in the TJRA Finals and placed first with a winning time of 7.30! Gatlin with Garrett Golden placed 2nd in 11-14 Team Roping and Gatlin won 2nd in the average (heeler) for both go rounds! He and Spotted Wolf also placed 4th in the Ribbon Roping Competition. Most recently, at the 2014 Oklahoma Youth Rodeo Association (OYRA), Gatlin made the finals in two events - chute doggin' and team roping.

Teresa Galliher of Texas reported that her Spanish Mustang, Moonshadow, competed in long distance competitive trail rides sponsored by the North American Trail Riding Conference. He is currently in first place in Novice Lightweight. Another horse she raised, Painted Indian, is in second place.

The Southwest Spanish Mustang Association (SSMA), the registry for The Heritage Horse of Oklahoma, appointed new Board members and a new secretary. Harold Davis and James Stephens are now serving on the Board, and Donna Davis is the new Secretary. Mr. Bryant Rickman continues as Chairman and Darlene Rickman as Registrar. Anyone wanting more information on the SSMA can visit their website at thesouthwestspanishmustangassociation.com.

The Spirit of Blackjack Mountain website has recently been given a new look. For much more information on the history of the horses and what they are doing, visit the website at

thespiritofblackjackmountain.com. We hope to continue in 2014 to educate everyone about these amazing horses – their heritage, their importance to not only the Choctaw people but all Native Americans and Oklahomans, their capabilities and wonderful dispositions

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